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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000952

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DEPT FOR EUR/SCE, NSC FOR BRAUN, USUN FOR DREW
SCHUFLETOWSKI, USOSCE FOR STEVE STEGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL UNMIK VI

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: KOSOVAR ALBANIAN LEADERSHIP ACCEPTS DELAY
IN STATUS PROCESS QUIETLY, FACES DOWN PRESS CRITICISM

Classified By: COM Tina S. Kaidanow for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Though apprehensive about the political repercussions of a delay in the status process, Kosovar Albanian leaders represented in the Unity Team (the negotiating team participating in Vienna negotiations) uniformly accepted the announcement by UN Special Envoy Ahtisaari that his presentation of the status package would be held until after Serbian parliamentary elections January 2017. Unity Team officials met together in emergency session the afternoon of November 10 and, in consultation with COM, drafted a statement that regretted the delay and evinced concern that the Serbian electoral timetable had influenced the decision, but noted Kosovo's continuing trust in the Vienna process. Though it does not preclude further problems down the road, the measured reaction by the Kosovar leadership, and the specific acceptance by the opposition of this temperate position, was key to maintaining stability in Kosovo as the status process moves forward. End summary.

¶2. (C) President Ahtisaari, after meeting with Contact Group representatives the morning of November 10, informed the Kosovo "Unity Team" of his decision to postpone presentation of his Kosovo status recommendation until after Serbian parliamentary elections in late January. Ahtisaari also provided the team with the text of a short press statement issued by the UNOSEK office to that same effect.

¶3. (C) The Unity Team came together in emergency session with two members absent (ORA opposition leader Veton Surroi, now in the U.S., and Prime Minister Ceku, away in Croatia) to discuss reaction to the Ahtisaari statement. Careful preparation by COM and earlier visits by Special Envoy Wisner and EUR Assistant Secretary Fried had laid the foundation for a considered and moderate response by the Kosovar team to a possible delay, but government and opposition officials in the Team were nonetheless concerned that their response to the delay must convey their determination to conclude the status process quickly, and thereby discourage extreme Kosovo voices from demanding counter-productive unilateral action in support of independence.

¶4. (C) Unity Team members consulted COM on elements of a

public statement, understanding correctly the importance of how they phrased their response for an international, as well as a domestic, audience. The statement as issued expressed "deep regret" over the delay and concern that the postponement had been tied to the Serbian parliamentary elections, but noted that the Kosovar leadership continues to believe that a resolution of status through the Ahtisaari process will contribute to regional stability and is in the best interests of all the people of Kosovo. The Team reaffirmed its intention to seek the independence of Kosovo, pledging to use the remaining period before the status decision to work closely with UNMIK, the new International Civilian Office planning team, the U.S. and the EU on transition arrangements for the post-status period.

¶5. (C) Immediately following issuance of the statement, the Unity Team members appeared jointly in front of the press (their second appearance of the week -- two days prior to the postponement decision, they had come together for a two-hour television interview on the main TV channel speaking about the Vienna negotiations) to convey a united front and combat press charges that the international community had gone back on its "promise" to decide status by the end of 2006. Unity Team members firmly rejected the notion of international "perfidy," with PDK opposition leader Hashim Thaci -- goaded persistently by reporters trying to induce him to take a stand at odds with the government -- particularly impressive in his resolve: Thaci proclaimed to the media crowd that "Kosovo had never been betrayed by the West, and therefore Kosovo, its politicians and its people must never allow themselves to deviate from their commitment to the partnership with the United States and European Union." (Note: Thaci departed the following day for a visit to the United States, where, among others, he will see Special Envoy

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Wisner and Department officials.)

¶6. (C) Comment: While they were prepared for the likelihood of a delay in the status decision by quiet intercession from U.S. officials and others, Kosovo leaders deserve credit for the mature and sober approach they demonstrated to the Ahtisaari announcement. This is particularly the case given the immediate and predictable onslaught of media commentary criticizing the Unity Team for its "failure" to attain status by the end of 2006. Cognizant both of the international and domestic repercussions of their response to the postponement, Unity Team members hit the right note in their collective and individual statements. There will be, without question, more political fallout in Kosovo from the delay, with intensified disaffection and anger if the presentation of the Ahtisaari package is pushed even further into 2007. Nevertheless, this was an encouraging demonstration of flexibility and understanding, one that sets the stage for a relatively quiet political season into the first part of the new year. End Comment.

¶7. (U) U.S. Office Pristina clears this cable for release to U.N. Special Envoy for Kosovo Martti Ahtisaari.
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